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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000328

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KPAO BA

SUBJECT: CRITIQUE OF SISTANI CREATES DEBATE ON FREEDOM OF
EXPRESSION

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) Columnist Sameera Rajab's February 16 article on the Iraqi elections that criticized Ayatollah Sistani created an intense debate on freedom of expression. The controversy continues to make headlines almost daily. Rajab, a columnist for Akhbar Al Khaleej, wrote that Sistani was an American general who was wrong to support the electoral process. Fellow journalists, members of parliament, clerics, charity organizations, and others spoke out against Rajab and said that people should not publicly criticize or insult religious leaders. The outcry led to a counter-reaction, with many denouncing what they viewed as calls for restrictions on freedom of expression. This episode demonstrates that many Bahrainis value freedom of expression, but they are coming to grips with whether freedom of expression permits others to denigrate religious leaders held in high esteem. End Summary.

Rajab: "General Sistani" Legitimizes U.S. Actions

2. (SBU) Akhbar Al Khaleej, a Bahraini daily, published an opinion piece on the Iraqi elections written by columnist Sameera Rajab February 16. In the column, Rajab gives a detailed analysis of the situation in Iraq, and includes a short section in the end about Sistani's role in legitimizing the January 30 elections. She argues that without the support of "General Sistani," the American leadership ("representatives of the Great Satan") would be dealing with a different scenario in Iraq now.

3. (SBU) Sameera Rajab is a regular columnist with Akhbar Al Khaleej and a known Baathist sympathizer. Her articles often focus on the United States and are marked by fiery criticisms of USG officials and policies. She comes from a prominent Bahraini Shi'a family, but is married to a member of the Al Khalifa ruling family.

Religious Leaders Should Not Be Insulted

4. (SBU) Rajab's article generated a hot debate on freedom of speech and respect for religious leaders. Numerous columnists, mostly in the independent newspaper Al Wasat, spoke out against Rajab. Al Wasat's Reem Khalifa wrote that any columnist who used the word "general" to describe a religious figure showed a lack of respect and did not belong to the liberal school of thought. Also in Al Wasat, columnist Sayed Dhiya Al Mousawi claimed that Rajab's commentary planted the seeds of sectarianism in the region. He demanded that the GOB and elected leaders take a stand against those who insult religious leaders. Al Mousawi added that Rajab and her fellow Baathists were still in shock from the fall of Saddam, and he advised them to move on and play a productive role in Iraq's transformation. No Bahraini columnists, other than Rajab's editor, wrote in favor of her or her rights as a journalist.

5. (SBU) Several of the most prominent clerics have focused on the Rajab controversy in their Friday prayers. Shi'a Sheikh Isa Qassem warned that those who insult religious leaders are attempting to destroy the religion itself. Sunni Sheikh Juma Tawfeeq criticized the GOB for keeping quiet on the Rajab article and said freedom of speech does not include the right to slander religious figures and Shari'a judges. (Note: In September 2003, Akhbar Al Khaleej published accusations of corruption in the Shari'a courts. End Note.) Shi'a Sheikh Abdulla Al Ghuraifi demanded that the Ministry of Information do something to stop the slander of religious officials "before the anger of the public erupts and causes something in this country that we would not like to see."

6. (SBU) More than twenty charities, mosques, and community centers joined together to fund several advertisements in Al Wasat against Rajab. A prominent businessman who owns a number of American franchises in Bahrain also paid for a large advertisement criticizing Rajab.

Freedom of Expression Must Be Protected

17. (SBU) Al Tajamo' Al Qowmi, the local Baathist party and a member of the alliance that boycotted the 2002 parliamentary elections, issued a statement in support of Rajab. The statement said that "intellectual terrorism" was destroying freedom of expression in Bahrain, and that Rajab was "an honest writer who has refused to accept the American occupation in Iraq." The Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society also issued a statement to express its solidarity with Rajab, underscoring the importance of protecting freedom of expression. The Bahrain Journalists Association appealed for calm and a constructive dialogue on the Rajab article, which it feared was dividing the press and religious institutions.

Reactions from Parliament

18. (C) In a luncheon with visiting NEA/ARPI Director Alan Misenheimer February 21, three Shura Council members and two MPs discussed the Rajab controversy. All of them agreed that Rajab's comments were offensive and that Akhbar Al Khaleej should not have printed them. Shura Council member Faisal Fouladh (who helped establish the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society) stated that despite the ignorance of her views, her freedom to express those views must be protected.

19. (C) MP Jassim Al A'Ali, a member of the Economic bloc, told PolOff that Rajab did not have the right to say what she did. He praised the civilized way that people reacted to the article, and said that if she had said the same thing in some other countries she could have been killed. He could not imagine how the GOB would have reacted if she had made such strong statements against the Prime Minister or another member of the royal family.

Akhbar Al Khaleej Responds

110. (SBU) Akhbar Al Khaleej editor Anwar Abdulrahman wrote a front page article February 23 regretting that the Rajab piece had angered religious scholars. He said that anyone who engaged in political activities was subject to critique, and that Rajab was justified in analyzing Sistani's role in Iraq. He reiterated that his newspaper would never instigate sectarianism, and that it had always called for one religion and one people without discrimination. Abdulrahman noted that 80 percent of Akhbar Al Khaleej's staff is Shi'a. He confirmed that he and Rajab support Sistani and appreciate his role in Iraq. He added, "All the writer did was analyze the political situation. The goal was not to defame the reputation of Sistani or insult him."

Comment

111. (C) Rajab's article touched on a number of enormously sensitive issues in Bahrain - religion, the sectarian divide, U.S. policy in Iraq, and freedom of expression. She is a controversial and divisive person and no doubt knew that the article would cause a flare up in tensions. Her writing for some time has been supportive of Saddam and the insurgency and has denigrated the Shi'a role in Iraq, and Bahrain's Shi'a were looking for an opportunity to discredit her. Although she is now portraying herself as a champion of freedom of expression, the reaction to her crude attacks on Sistani demonstrates that Bahrainis are not in agreement whether this freedom should include insulting criticisms of religious leaders held in high esteem.

112. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.
MONROE